



RABIES

What is RABIES?

Rabies is a fatal disease of the brain and spinal cord that is caused by a virus. Rabies in humans is very rare in the United States, but rabies in certain animals, especially wildlife, is common in many parts of the country, including Delaware.

How is Rabies spread?

The Rabies virus lives in the saliva (spit) and nerve tissues of infected animals and is spread when they bite or scratch. The virus may also be spread if saliva from an infected animal touches broken skin, open wounds, or the lining of the mouth, nose or eyes.

What kinds of animals spread Rabies?

The Rabies virus can infect any mammal (if it has hair or fur, it is a mammal), but it is more common among certain ones like raccoons, bats, foxes, and skunks. Cats, dogs, and livestock (farm animals) can also get Rabies (and spread it to their owners) if they do not have special shots to protect them. Rabies is very rare among small rodents like squirrels, rats, mice, guinea pigs, chipmunks, hamsters, moles, and gerbils. Rabies is also very rare among rabbits and hares. Birds, fish, reptiles (such as snakes, turtles, and lizards), amphibians (such as frogs and salamanders), and insects (bugs) cannot get or spread Rabies.

How common is animal Rabies in Delaware?

Since 1988, when Rabies in raccoons first appeared in Delaware, cases of raccoon Rabies have been found throughout the state. Rabid bats, first found in 1941, continue to be a problem.

How can you tell if an animal has Rabies?

Animals with Rabies often behave strangely after the virus attacks their brains. Rabid animals may attack people or other animals for no reason, or they may lose their fear of people and seem to be unusually friendly. Not all rabid animals act in these ways. To be safe, avoid all wild animals, especially raccoons, bats, foxes and skunks. Never feed nor touch any stray cats or dogs.

What should you do if you think you were exposed to Rabies?

If a person is bitten or scratched by any animal (stray or wild, pet or farm animal), especially if it behaved oddly, follow these steps immediately:

- Wash the wound with soap and water **right away** for at least 10 minutes.
- Call your doctor and Delaware's Division of Public Health (DPH) Rabies Program at (302) 744-4545 as soon as you finish washing. They will decide if you need to be treated for Rabies. Follow their instructions exactly.
- Contact your local animal control officer to find and catch the animal that scratched or bit you. DPH staff can instruct you how to have it tested for Rabies by the Delaware Public Health Laboratory.

If your pet is bitten or scratched by an animal that you think may have Rabies, put on gloves before touching your pet. Follow the same steps, but call your pet's veterinarian instead of your doctor.

24/7 Emergency Contact Number: 1-888-295-5156

Revised 05/2006

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What is the treatment for people exposed to Rabies?

Two medicines are prescribed for people exposed to Rabies. One medicine starts to fight the virus right away and is given only **once**. The other medicine is Rabies vaccine (which gives long-lasting protection), and is given as five shots in the arm over a month's time. Persons who received the full series of rabies shots in the past need only two Rabies vaccine shots if they are exposed afterwards. To work best, the medicines should be given as soon as possible after the bite or scratch. If the suspicious animal is caught and tested for Rabies, your doctor can review the test results to determine if shots are necessary.

How can you prevent Rabies?

- Avoid wild animals, especially raccoons, bats, foxes, and skunks. Do not feed or pet strays. Avoid any animal (wild, farm or pet) that you do not know. Report animals behaving oddly.
- Teach your children to avoid wildlife, strays and all other animals they do not know well.
- Do not handle dead, sick or injured animals yourself; call the police or animal control officials. If you must handle the animal, use heavy gloves, sticks or other tools to avoid direct contact.
- Vaccinate your pets against Rabies, and keep their shots up-to-date. By law, all dogs, cats and ferrets must be vaccinated against Rabies.
- Feed pets indoors and keep them in at night. If they are outside during the day, keep them on a leash or fenced-in so they cannot wander. It is possible for vaccinated pets to get Rabies. Pets allowed to roam freely are more likely to get Rabies and possibly expose people or other pets in your home.
- Fasten trash can lids tightly. Garbage attracts animals (like raccoons, skunks, opossums, and strays) looking for an easy meal.
- It is against the law to keep wild animals such as raccoons or skunks as pets. There are no Rabies vaccines for most wild animals.
- Cap chimneys with screens and block openings in attics, cellars and porches to keep wild animals like bats and raccoons out of houses.
- If you have bats in your house, talk to a professional about bat-proofing your home.
- Animal control officers, veterinarians, their assistants and others who have a lot of contact with strays or wildlife should get routine rabies vaccinations and rechecks to protect themselves in case they are exposed to rabid animals.

Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse, or health center.
- Delaware's Division of Public Health Rabies Program at (302) 744-4545 has information and help available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.